

Other areas in which RN and LPN staff nurses differ are in their marital status and their age distributions. A higher proportion of RN staff nurses reported being married at the time of the survey (78%) than did LPN staff nurses (68%). LPNs, as a group, are older than their RN counterparts. The average age for LPN staff nurses is 44.7 years of age, compared to 42 years for RN staff nurses in the state. Those age differences have been consistent for at least the last 20 years, based on other research done by the NC Center for Nursing.

RN and LPN staff nurses also differ in terms of their work characteristics. Twice the proportion of staff RNs work in part-time positions (26%) compared to LPN staff nurses (12%). When these findings are compared to information in the 2000 license renewal files, the percentage of RNs in full time positions hasn't changed, but the percent of LPN staff nurses employed full time appears to have increased. This may be an anomaly in the data or it might be an accurate reflection of changes in the demand for nursing services in the state. If the latter is true, it suggests that that LPNs may have been more sensitive to the recent recession than their RN colleagues and have expanded their employment time to increase earnings, or employers may be encouraging more workforce participation from the less expensive and less educated part of the nursing workforce, or may be using LPNs as substitutes for harder to find RNs, even though the restricted scope of practice held by LPNs does not allow for true substitution. Or, it may be that all of these scenarios are in operation simultaneously.

The types of settings that staff nurses are employed in did not have any influence on the proportion of RN or LPN staff nurses in full or part time positions. The marital status of the nurses did, however. Among married staff RNs, 31% reported part time employment compared to 6% of unmarried RN colleagues. This association was not present for LPN staff nurses of whom approximately 12% reported part time employment, whether married or not married. RN staff nurses also maintained a consistent percentage in part time employment across various age groups. Among LPN staff nurses the proportion in part time positions increased sharply for those over the age of 55.

Employment settings were collapsed into two general types in this study: those which require around-the-clock nurse staffing (i.e. hospital in-patient units and skilled nursing / rehabilitation facilities) and those with less intense staffing requirements (e.g. out-patient settings in the community). A higher percentage of RN staff nurse respondents reported employment in around-the-clock settings (60%) compared to their LPN counterparts (50%). However, this findings was not consistent across all regions of the state. The difference was most pronounced in the Central region, where 64% of staff RNs were employed in around-the-clock settings compared to 50% of LPN staff nurses in the region. In the Eastern and Western regions RN and LPN staff nurses were more similar in their distribution across setting types. No doubt this finding is influenced by the fact that the Central region of the state encompasses a large number of tertiary and quaternary hospitals relative to other regions in the state.

A smaller proportion of married staff nurses reported being employed in around-the-clock settings at the time of the survey. Since this finding is consistent for both RN and LPN staff nurses it suggests that there may be something about such settings which is incompatible with married life. The need to fill night time and weekend shifts in around-the-clock settings may be a large factor in this particular finding.